

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH** APR 7 1969

*Research  
Memorandum*

RSE-24, April 2, 1969

To : The Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *Thomas L. Hughes*  
Subject: USSR-NIGERIA: Bilateral Tensions Increase  
as War Drags On

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Moscow's views of its interests in Nigeria in general, and of its relations with Lagos in particular, are important factors in assessing the possibility that the Soviets might be interested in a compromise solution to the Nigerian civil war. This paper analyzes current Soviet-Nigerian relations and concludes that the USSR may be inclined to look more favorably on such a solution than it has before now.

ABSTRACT

Even while strong Soviet military and political support for Federal Nigeria in the civil war continues, relations between Moscow and Lagos are becoming increasingly characterized by disagreements, disappointments, and frictions. Recent points of tension include: disgust by high Nigerian Government officials at the Soviet handling of a naval visit to Lagos, refusal by Nigerian leader Gowon to let a Soviet technical team inspect a defense facility, Moscow's rejection of Nigerian pleas for more sophisticated military support, and growing Soviet disappointment with the course of the war.

The civil war, and Moscow's exploitation of it, have made possible a considerable increase in Soviet presence and visibility

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in Nigeria. But the war may now be nearing the end of its utility for the USSR as a vehicle for improving its position there. Moscow's dilemma is that its bid for greater influence in Nigeria may come increasingly into conflict with other international considerations, e.g., its relations with Paris (Biafra's chief supporter), its image in the face of humanitarian sympathy for Biafra's plight, and signs of growing African sentiment for a compromise peace settlement. Yet if the Soviets decreased their military commitment to the Nigerian Government -- or, given Nigerian exasperation with the war, even if they kept it at its current level -- they could imperil what they have already gained in Lagos.

The Soviets may well be reappraising their Nigerian policy with an eye to seeking or supporting a compromise solution which could bring the war to an end. There are two cases in which they would probably not be interested in such a solution: (1) if they felt that their support for a settlement would cause the Federal Government to think that they had sold it out, and (2) if the British position in Nigeria eroded to the point where Moscow believed it could replace London as Lagos's chief patron. On the other hand, if British influence remained strong and if the Soviets thought they could play the role of a Tashkent-style mediator without sacrificing their significant presence in Nigeria, they could possibly be tempted to support a negotiated settlement.

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Bilateral Problems Proliferate

Nigerian distrust of Soviet motives, which still pervades important elements in the government (including its chief, General Gowon, as well as some other military leaders), has manifested itself in several ways recently. Gowon reportedly was incensed at the behavior of Soviet Ambassador Romanov during the Soviet naval visit to Lagos March 5-9. In an attempt to regain custody of a Soviet seaman who had jumped ship in Lagos harbor, Romanov apparently told the Nigerian police that Gowon himself had ordered the immediate release of the would-be defector. At a staff meeting March 10 Gowon denounced Romanov as a liar. The naval visit also occasioned a personal dispute between Romanov and Admiral Joseph Wey, the Nigerian navy commander, who had succeeded in postponing the visit several times and then in limiting it to fewer days than the Soviets wanted. Wey also publicly called Romanov a dishonest man and accused him of saying malicious things about him.

Despite the great importance of Soviet military aid, the Nigerians have tried jealously to protect themselves from Soviet snooping. Lagos has consistently attempted to limit the size of the Soviet Embassy there and to control Soviet front organizations. In January Gowon refused to allow a Soviet technical team to inspect a defense facility in Kaduna, even though the team had been invited to do so by the Nigerian Defense Ministry.

For their part, the Soviets have not increased their level of military support for Federal Nigeria, although they have continued to furnish additional quantities of the types of equipment already provided. (Moscow has supplied an estimated \$13 million worth of arms to Nigeria since mid-1967.) In February Moscow rejected a Nigerian request for Soviet pilots to fly night missions over Biafran territory (Egyptian pilots now used have proved inefficient on such missions and are reluctant to continue them). Moscow has failed to supply Lagos with weapons (e.g., radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns or surface-to-air missiles) which could interdict arms flights to Biafra. Moreover, intelligence reports have indicated that the Soviets are disappointed with the Federal Government's failure to win the war quickly.

The Civil War: Past Plus, Future Minus for the Soviets?

From a relatively small base two years ago, the USSR has increased its presence and visibility in Nigeria considerably.

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In addition to their influence over the Nigerian left, which is exercised chiefly through the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party (a crypto-communist party founded in 1963), the Nigerian Trade Union Congress, and the Nigerian-Soviet Friendship Society (the largest of its kind in Africa), the Soviets are now being treated with increased friendliness by senior civil servants and civilian politicians. Despite the problems connected with the naval visit, it was the Soviet navy's first to Nigeria, and as such symbolizes the USSR's growing prestige there. As a result of its military aid, Moscow also has succeeded in stationing a Military Attache in Lagos. While by no means the dominant foreign power in Nigeria, the USSR has made remarkable progress in a basically Western-oriented country.

It is the civil war, which Moscow exploited by responding promptly to the Federal Government's need for arms, that has made these Soviet inroads possible. However, the war may be nearing the end of its utility for the Soviets as a vehicle for improving their position in Nigeria. By limiting the quality of the military equipment it is supplying to Lagos, Moscow has laid itself open to possible Nigerian charges that it is interested only in prolonging the war to protect the growth of Soviet influence in Nigeria. Persistent Soviet refusals to meet Nigerian pleas for a higher level of military aid would be likely to produce still more bilateral tensions, which could culminate in a full-scale Nigerian effort to limit and even diminish the Soviet diplomatic, cultural, and economic presence. If the Soviets retaliated by reducing military and/or economic aid, they could jeopardize further the influence they have worked so hard to create.

On the other hand, if Moscow were to escalate the level of military aid with the aim of producing a quick and decisive Federal victory, it could run the risk of aggravating France, Biafra's chief supporter, and possibly of provoking an increase in French aid. This in turn could result in continued military stalemate and thus confront Moscow with the same questions all over again. French support for Biafra is thus a partial deterrent to an increased level of Soviet military assistance to Federal Nigeria. Moreover, unhappy Soviet experience with heavy commitments to the UAR and -- in the sub-Sahara Africa -- to Ghana and Mali indicates that the USSR would be unlikely to expand dramatically its military investment in Nigeria.

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Moscow's dilemma is that its goals in Nigeria may come increasingly into conflict with international considerations (its relations with Paris, its image in the face of humanitarian sympathy for Biafra's plight, signs of growing African sentiment for a compromise peace settlement). To ease their position, Soviet policy-makers may look with more sympathy than they have before on a compromise settlement which could allow Moscow to retain most of its gains in Federal Nigeria, while recouping its prestige in eastern Nigeria. Indeed, Biafra is an area to which the Soviets devoted most of their attention before the war began, and there is evidence that they have been in intermittent contact with Biafran representatives since the outbreak of hostilities. Soviet press and propaganda organs have consistently referred to the Biafrans and their leader, Col. Ojukwu, as misguided but not malevolent.

There is other fragmentary evidence that Moscow has not locked itself too tightly into support of the Federal side. A March 17 article in the London Financial Times quoted "reliable sources" to the effect that high-ranking Biafran officials had been approached by Soviet representatives who suggested that Moscow could use its influence in Lagos to win a political settlement acceptable to the Biafran leadership. It is possible that the Financial Times story is no more than a Biafran attempt to drive a wedge between Moscow and Lagos, but it may contain a germ of truth.

#### Whither the Soviets?

Under what conditions would Moscow be disposed to seek, or agree to, a negotiated compromise settlement of the war? The Soviets would not favor such a settlement if they thought that it would undermine their goal of preserving and increasing their influence in Nigeria. If Soviet support for a settlement caused the Federal Government to feel that the Kremlin had sold it out, the Soviets would probably not be interested. If, on the other hand, Moscow thought it could play the role of a Tashkent-style mediator, winning bouquets from both the Nigerian and Biafran side (as well as from Africa and the neutralists in general), it could be very tempted.

In the coming weeks, the Soviets can be expected to be very sensitive to two major considerations. The first is British influence in Nigeria. If the growing unofficial sympathy in Britain for Biafra were to damage the British position in Lagos, or if the British Government were to take any unilateral action which

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could be construed in Nigeria as abandonment of the Federal side, the Soviets would probably be inclined to reiterate their support for Lagos, on the assumption that they would stand to gain what the British lost. Thus, Moscow's support for a negotiated settlement probably depends on the continuation of British influence in Federal Nigeria.

The second major Soviet consideration is whether, in a war which the Nigerians seem unable to win at the present level of Soviet (as well as British and other outside) aid, the Soviets can maintain the influence they have gained and still refuse an enhanced level of military support. Their policy of limited military assistance has paid off so far. But will it continue to pay off as tensions between the governments in Moscow and Lagos increase? Or will Soviet exasperation at Nigerian military and economic inefficiency and Nigerian exasperation at Soviet failure to provide advanced weapons combine, as the war drags on, to erode the influence which Moscow has gained in Nigeria? The current situation in Nigeria suggests that Soviet policy there is entering a period of greater flexibility, during which Moscow may be increasingly willing to seek a way out of its growing dilemma by means of a compromise settlement of the war.

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